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EDITORIAL

Once upon a time thoughtful teachers of English composition believed in the spiral course of study, in which all topics were touched in each grade, at progressively higher levels. But the results were disappointing. The persistent recurrence even in college classes of the sentence fault and a host of other almost equally irritating errors led to a demand that each of these matters of form or mechanics be assigned a definite place in the curriculum and *mastered* at that point. Definite standards to be attained in each year would, the reformers said, result in the children's *really knowing* some things. A form once taught would be out of the way and succeeding teachers could pass on to new forms until in the eighth grade—or at any rate in the twelfth grade—errors would be entirely eliminated. After that the dreaded Freshman English would cease to be a desert of dry drills and become lovely garden wherein the flowers of rhetoric grew in well-ordered luxuriance and the sound of languages was as the music of plashing fountains.

The attempt to designate the grades in which the various points of grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc., should be “learned once for all” disclosed the fact that the schools were attempting to teach much more than could be done thoroughly. So arose the cry for minimum essentials. For several years English teachers’ associations have been absorbed in determining the really necessary items and distributing them among the school grades. A great number of state and local courses of study have been revised in accordance with these findings, the newest ones being so simplified as to be almost possible of execution.

These reforms are, we believe, real progress. No one wishes to go back to the confusion and overload. Some college teachers testify that successive entering classes are progressively better trained—more literate.

Have we, then, the solution of the problem of content and method of instruction in composition? Only half of it—and the easier half. Literacy is not all of expressional power, if indeed it be even the major element of that power. Unity, coherence, and emphasis, in spite of the pedagogical crimes committed in their names, have lost none of

their intrinsic importance. Power of illustration, command of an accurate and fresh vocabulary, directness in both language and manner, are powerful factors in effective communication of ideas or feelings. These six excellencies, since they can never be acquired once for all but must be matters of slow and simultaneous growth through all the years, are in too many schools either minimized or altogether neglected. The difficulty of measuring the development of these qualities is contributing to the same result. Some even deny the possibility of cultivating the more subtle of them, declaring that they are only the expression of personality. As if personality could not be cultivated!

Without relinquishing the advantages gained by the sifting and organizing of the *mechanics* of language, that is, by the minimum essentials movement, we must provide also for the cultivation of these other equally important elements of language power. We cannot abandon the drills upon grammatical and written forms, but we must so motivate and refine these drills that they shall not occupy more than their just share of the time. Finally we must recognize that neither the minimum essentials of mechanics nor the more subtle qualities of effectiveness are primary—either absolutely or chronologically—but that both these phases of language deserve approximately *equal* and *simultaneous* attention.

The size of the *English Journal's* subscription list is a matter of personal interest to its readers. That list is now large enough to assure the life of the *Journal* on its present scale, but **Boost!** additional support would result in a bigger and an even better magazine.

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